“No Cracks, no Blind Spots, no Gaps”: Technologically-Enabled “Preventative” Counterterrorism and Mass Repression in Xinjiang, China

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Abstract The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is now the site of the largest mass repression of an ethnic and/or religious minority in the world today. Researchers estimate that since 2016 over one million people (mostly ethnic Uyghurs) have been detained without trial in the XUAR in a system of “re-education” camps. Outside of the camps, the region’s Turkic Muslim population are subjected to a dense network of hi-tech surveillance systems, checkpoints, and interpersonal monitoring which severely limit all forms of personal freedom penetrating society to the granular level. This chapter argues that the erection of this “carceral state” has been propelled by a “preventative” counterterrorism that has incorporated key practices (e.g. greater reliance on new surveillance technologies) and discourses (e.g. Islamophobia) of the “global war on terrorism” with the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in pursuit of the negation of the very possibility of “terrorism”. As such the contemporary situation in the XUAR represents not only the mass repression of an ethnic and religious minority by an authoritarian regime but also an example of the dystopian potentialities of ostensibly “neutral” technologies.

1 Introduction

Wrists and ankles strapped into a restraining “tiger chair”, a man is used as a subject with which to “train” artificial intelligence-assisted facial recognition technology to detect states of emotion. Minute changes in facial expression are analyzed by the facial recognition technology to determine whether the test subject possesses a “negative mindset” or a heightened state of anxiety, allegedly indicating a potential for anti-social behavior [82]. This is not a vision from a dystopic television series.

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On the contrary it is a lived reality in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the far north-west of the People's Republic of China (PRC) where the Chinese state, in concert with a number of China's major surveillance technology companies, has striven to perfect new means of monitoring the region's Uyghur population. Researchers estimate that since 2016 over one million people (mostly ethnic Uyghurs) have been detained without trial in the XUAR in a system of "re-education" camps [22, 34]. Outside of the camps, the region's Turkic Muslim population are subjected to a dense network of hi-tech surveillance systems (including key elements of China's "social credit" system), checkpoints, and interpersonal monitoring which severely limit all forms of personal freedom penetrating society to the granular level [62, 95]. The objective, as XUAR Chinese Communist Party (CCP) deputy leader Zhu Hailun asserted in 2017, is to ensure that there are "no cracks, no blind spots, no gaps" in the state's surveillance of the region [87].

This chapter argues that the erection of this "carceral state" has been propelled by a "preventative" counterterrorism that has incorporated key practices (e.g. greater reliance on new surveillance technologies) and discourses (e.g. Islamophobia) of the "global war on terrorism" with the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in pursuit of the negation of the very possibility of "terrorism". As such the contemporary situation in the XUAR represents not only the mass repression of an ethnic and religious minority by an authoritarian regime (although it is most certainly that) but also an example of the dystopian potentialities of ostensibly "neutral" technologies.

In this latter respect, I argue that it has been the intersection of technologically-enabled surveillance with the CCP's evolving ideological concept of "social management" that defines the practice and effects of China's "preventative" counterterrorism in the XUAR. Descriptions of the system of surveillance erected in the XUAR as simply the manifestation of a new type of "police state" only capture part of the story. Control of the region's Uyghur population is but one objective of the CCP in XUAR. Indeed, as Richard Jenkins reminds us, surveillance is but "a means to an end", namely the "protection" and "management" of either the population-at-large or specific segments thereof ([54]: 162). The case of Chinese counterterrorism in the XUAR reveals the Chinese state's propensity to be much more explicit in its desire—relative to governments in the liberal West—to pursue the active (and often coercive) 'management' of specific segments of its population.

China's counterterrorism policy is in fact highly suggestive of processes of "high modernism" described by James C. Scott in which the state seeks to legitimate the "rational design of social order" ([78]: 4) through the centralization, collection, and processing of information. Scott suggested that the imposition of such "high modernism" tended to correlate with crises (e.g. economic depression, social revolution or war) and authoritarianism. In particular, the manner in which the system of pervasive surveillance intersects with the CCP's practices of ideological "re-education" in XUAR demonstrates how surveillance—from the state's perspective—serves goals beyond mere control of subject populations by identifying, categorizing, and ascribing sanction to individuals to produce "transformed" citizens. That surveillance is a central enabler of the CCP's social engineering objective is demonstrated by the assertion of a XUAR government spokesman on 25 May, 2021, that heightened

security measures and “re-education” were required in order to “remove extremist thoughts” from Uyghur minds and “transform” them from “ghosts” into “humans” [77]. While the ‘threat of terrorism and religious extremism’ has stimulated the development of ‘new forms of centralized surveillance, monitoring and identification’ regardless of regime type ([84]: 61) the Chinese state has thus been able to instrumentalize the threat of Uyghur ‘terrorism’ and ‘religious extremism’ to further a deeper end—the remoulding an entire population’s behaviours in the name of cultural assimilation. As we will see, this has significant human rights implications and poses a challenge for liberal democracies who espouse the importance of values like free movement, individual privacy, and free speech.

2 Chinese Colonialism and Uyghur ‘Terrorism’ in Xinjiang

Despite China’s contemporary claim that Xinjiang (literally ‘new dominion’ or ‘new frontier’) has been ‘an inseparable part of the unitary multi-ethnic Chinese nation’ since the Han Dynasty (206 BC—24 AD), it often remained beyond Chinese dominion due to its geopolitical position as a ‘Eurasian crossroad’ and the ethno-cultural dominance of Turkic and Mongol peoples [15].

After experiencing significant autonomy from the Republic of China (1911–1949), Xinjiang was “peacefully liberated” by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in October 1949 and the CCP confronted the question of “how to run an empire without looking like colonialists” [65]. Their answer—recognition of the region’s 12 non-Han *minzu* (nationality or ethnic group) and implementation of a system of “national regional autonomy”—in theory, was meant to ensure that “beneath the supreme central CCP power” the various *minzu* were to stand as equals, their individual culture, language and practice of religion respected and protected [65]. In practice, however, this was accompanied by tight political, social and cultural control, encouragement of Han Chinese settlement, and state-led economic development, backed by the repression of overt manifestations of opposition and dissent by the security forces ([7]: 120–129).

After the collapse of the neighbouring Soviet Union in 1991, the focus of Beijing’s concerns regarding the security of Xinjiang shifted from state-based threats to largely non-state ones driven by the convergence of the Islamic revival in neighbouring Central Asia and Afghanistan and relative weakness of the post-Soviet states [5].

Under Deng’s successor, Jiang Zemin, the question of Xinjiang’s economic development assumed national importance under his Great Western Development (GWD) campaign, formally launched in 2000. Under the GWD Xinjiang was envisaged as becoming an industrial and agricultural base and a trade and energy corridor for the national economy. Central to the state’s developmental agenda was a focus on a variety of “mega-projects” such as massive oil and natural-gas pipelines and infrastructure developments linking Xinjiang with Central and South Asia and the various sub-regions of Xinjiang with each other and the interior of China [1].

While bringing economic development, such projects also created a variety of new socio-economic pressures—encouragement of further Han settlement, rapid urbanization, and environmental degradation—that exacerbated interethnic tensions [11]. However many Uyghurs felt they had not benefitted from economic development due to a variety of factors including: the concentration of Xinjiang’s urban centers and industry in the north of the province; targeting of state investment in large infrastructure projects in which companies have tended to employ Han Chinese; and widening rural–urban disparities [4, 14, 17].

This period not coincidentally saw an appreciable increase in Uyghur unrest and militancy. Data collected by the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database, for example, records 135 attacks in Xinjiang across the 1992 and 2017 period resulting in 767 fatalities [39]. However, those figures count as terrorist attacks a number of incidents—such as the 7 July 2009 violence in Xinjiang’s capital, Urumqi, which resulted in 184 fatalities—even though they’re more accurately defined as inter-ethnic rioting or communal violence prompted by the long-term marginalisation of the Uyghur population (see [9, 16, 19]). Omitting this incident alone decreases the death toll from terrorism in Xinjiang to 583 over the 25-year period.

This only increased in intensity after the events of 9/11 as the Party-state instrumentalized the threat and discourse of “global terrorism” to justify and expand its efforts to monitor and control key markers of Uyghur identity such as religious observance/piety. It is clear that 9/11 provided Beijing with the stimulus to reframe its efforts in Xinjiang as ‘counterterrorist’ rather than simply counter ‘separatist’ in nature. This began immediately after 9/11, when Beijing released its first documentation of terrorist incidents in Xinjiang, blaming a previously unknown group, the ‘East Turkestan Islamic Movement’ (ETIM), for ‘over’ 200 ‘terrorist incidents’ between 1990 and 2001 [50]. A number of high-profile attacks in more recent years, such as the October 2013 SUV attack in Tiananmen Square and the April 2014 Kunming railway station mass stabbing attack, reinforced China’s official narrative that it faces a genuine terrorist threat stemming from Xinjiang ([28], 73–74).

The presence of the al-Qaeda-aligned TIP in Syria from 2012 onward was important in assisting Beijing in its desire to paint Uyghur militancy as intimately interconnected with global ‘jihadist’ forces [28]. Despite these linkages, however, there is in fact little available evidence of TIP’s direct involvement in attacks in Xinjiang. TIP has claimed responsibility for a number of high-profile attacks, such as the so-called SUV attack of October 2013 in Tiananmen Square, but, Jacob Zenn notes ‘only a 2011 hit-and-run attack in Kashgar’ has been ‘credibly proven’ to have been organised by the group from Afghanistan [92]. Chinese state media however leveraged the presence of Uyghurs in Syria to argue that Beijing’s hard-line in Xinjiang was warranted. The English-language tabloid, *Global Times*, for instance, published an editorial on 12 August 2018 asserting that China’s hard-line approach in the region had prevented it from becoming ‘China’s Libya’ or ‘China’s Syria’ [40]. Prior to institution of China’s hard-line, it continued, ‘young people were brainwashed by extremist thoughts and manipulated by terrorist organizations’, resulting in terrorist attacks not only in Xinjiang but also ‘in places such as Tiananmen Square of Beijing and Kunming Railway Station’ [40].

3 China's Counterterrorism Policy: Toward 'Enduring Peace'

It was in this period of heightened official concern with the threat of terrorism to Xinjiang that China's form of “preventative” counterterrorism took shape. Of particular note was the development of a new strategy based on the integration of traditional Maoist ‘mass line’ (*qunzhong luxian*) mobilization and social control with new forms of technologically-enabled surveillance and policing. The “mass line”—in which the CCP sought to organize and mobilize the Chinese population in support of the Party's objectives and policies through regular mass campaigns—was a regular and defining feature of Chinese governance under Mao Zedong's leadership. The aim, as Elizabeth Perry ([68], 33) has noted, “was to prevent bureaucratic inertia by recruiting grassroots enthusiasts to augment (and in some cases override) local party and government cadres so as to advance the central leaders' agendas”. Indeed, the “mass line” was a chief means through which the Maoist project of the “achievement of Utopian social goals by means of class struggle and the cleansing of society in order to create an egalitarian society” was enacted ([2], 324). For Xi, the return of mass campaigns is a necessary measure to “standardize party procedures, curb corruption and enhance the party's overall competence” and thus ensure not only the sustainability of one-party rule but also the country's “great national rejuvenation” [46].

In Xinjiang, this has entailed intensified Party-state interventions in society in order to ensure the twin goals of “stability” and “development”. The need for such intervention in the CCP's estimation was underlined by inter-ethnic violence in the region's capital of Urumqi on 5 July 2009 (referred to in China as the 7/5 Incident) The 7/5 Incident, in which officially 194 people were killed over two days of inter-ethnic violence, convinced influential leaders that the twin strategies of “national regional autonomy” and state-led economic development upon which Chinese governance had rested since 1978 had exacerbated rather than assuaged long-standing sources of discontent with the Chinese state.

The CCP's immediate response to the 7/5 Incident was focused on replacement of senior party figures in Xinjiang (including Urumqi CCP secretary, Li Zhi, and long-serving Xinjiang CCP chairman, Wang Lequan), deployment of People's Armed Police and Special Police Units to XUAR, and a renewed focus on “stability maintenance” and economic development [72]. In this latter regard, then President Hu Jintao, at the first Central Xinjiang Work Forum (XJWFI) of the CCP held 17–19 May 2010 unveiled a “Xinjiang support package” including targeted central government investment and infrastructure spending. The objective, according to Hu, was to achieve “leapfrog development” of the region that would lift it's GDP to the national average by 2015 and thus contribute to “ethnic unity” and “social stability” [55, 91].

The new XUAR CCP chairman, Zhang Chunxian, thus embarked on what was dubbed a ‘two handed’ policy in the region of both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ measures focused on ‘stability maintenance’ work and improving ‘people's livelihood’ that would consolidate the Party's ‘grassroots infrastructure’ throughout the region [63].

After 2009 official public security spending increased rapidly, with much of was spent on the introduction of high-definition surveillance cameras across public spaces in Xinjiang, including in mosques [30]. By the next year at least 40,000 high-definition “Eagle-Eye” surveillance cameras equipped with ‘riot-proof’ casings were fitted on buses, in schools, and in shopping centres, as well as on the streets of urban areas to increase police presence in key places, vital sectors and public areas ([37, 85]: 58).

Zhang’s era of ‘two-handed’ policy however was also accompanied by a transition in how the CCP conceived of the relationship between development, identity and security. For much of the post-Mao era the Party’s strategy in Xinjiang had rested on the assumption that development would resolve its “Uyghur question” by breaking down the traditional cultural, religious and social ties that underpinned Uyghur identity and thus secure the region. After 7/5, however, economic development per se was viewed as no longer sufficient. Rather, the question now was what obstacles prevented development from achieving the goal of integration and what should the Party do about it. An answer emerged from the debates about a so-called “second generation” of ethnic minority policy after 2009 [60]. Party-affiliated scholars such as Ma Rong, Hu Angang, and Hu Lianhe argued that the “first generation” of policy—based on ethnic equality and “national regional autonomy”—had solidified ethnic boundaries, ethnic elites, and notions of “separateness” [61]. The direction of ethnic minority policy since has demonstrated that their conclusion has been that there is something intrinsic to Uyghur identity that blocks the path to the Party’s vision of modernization, and hence, integration. Advocates of “second generation” policy therefore argued that ethnic policy must discard the nominal pluralism and preferential policies of the past in favour of an approach that explicitly sought the “mingling”, “fusing” or “standardization” of ethnic groups with a supra-national conception of the Chinese “state-nation” (*zhongguo minzu*) [61].

In March 2012 however Xi Jinping (then Vice-President) rebuked Zhang Chunxian’s ‘two handed’ approach. Xi noted not only that ‘Xinjiang work’ held a ‘particularly important strategic position in the overall work of the party and the state’ but that XUAR CCP officials must ‘unswervingly insist on *both* development and stability’ and ‘hold high the banner of unity’ [81]. In October 2014, the National Security Commission (NSC) also established a National Anti-Terrorism Intelligence Centre to strengthen anti-terrorism intelligence gathering in order to boost its counterterrorism pre-emptive and preventive capabilities ([53]: 190). The State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC), which had previously led the development and implementation of governance of ethnic minority regions, was also down-graded as the locus of ethnic minority governance after 2009 as provincial level CCP United Front Work Department ‘offices assumed primary responsibility for ethnic work in ethnic minority regions, with SEAC officials left to follow the direct lead of their Party counterparts’ ([21]: 491).

The need for greater Party control over ethnic minority governance was underlined by a number of violent incidents in or connected to Xinjiang in 2013 and 2014 including the so-called ‘SUV attack’ in Tiananmen Square on 28 October 2013 and the Kunming Railway station attack of 1 March 2014 that officials blamed on ‘radicalized’ Uyghurs [8, 73]. These incidents contributed to Xi’s decision after a

Politburo meeting on 19 December 2013 that the CCP would abandon Zhang’s ‘two-handed’ policy in Xinjiang. State media reported that the Party’s ‘prime task’ in Xinjiang would now be the pursuit of ‘social stability and an enduring peace’ [90]. This approach subsequently took on the language of counter terrorism in response to the perceived extremist ideologies found in the region.

As would become clear over the following two years, the goal of ‘enduring peace’ in Xinjiang would be sought through reinvigoration of Maoist ‘mass line’ forms of Party mobilization, implementation of new forms of technological surveillance and intensive ‘de-extremification’ work, including ‘concentrated re-education training’ of those deemed to be at risk of ‘extremism’. After further violence in May and July 2014, Zhang Chunxian voiced the starkest rhetoric yet exhorting a meeting of the XUAR Party Committee to fight a ‘people’s war against terrorism’ that would not only ‘cut weeds’ but also ‘dig out the roots’ of extremism [52]. This resulted in accelerated arrests and trials of suspected ‘terrorists’—including public, mass sentencing rallies of Uyghur suspects—and ongoing sweeps of Uyghur neighborhoods and mosques in search of potential militants and their weapons [58].

These trends of increased technological surveillance combined with ideological ‘re-education’ of those defined as potential ‘extremists’ were accelerated in 2016 under the new XUAR CCP Chairman Chen Quanguo. Chen had in fact implemented a policing system of ‘grid style management’ during his previous role as Party leader in Tibet (2011–2015) that segmented ‘urban communities into geometric zones’ policed by ‘convenience’ police stations connected to CCTV cameras and police databases enabling greater surveillance capabilities [94]. In Xinjiang, Chen implemented ‘grid management’ and integrated it with the CCTV surveillance systems established under his immediate predecessor, resulting in a multi-tiered policing system based on exponential recruitment of contract police officers to man ‘convenience’ police stations [93, 95]. Additional surveillance measures—including compulsory fitting of GPS trackers in motor vehicles, use of facial recognition scanners at checkpoints and major public amenities and installation of ‘nanny apps’ that wipe smartphones of so-called “subversive” material—were also implemented under Chen’s watch [32, 70]. The purpose of such a system was explicitly detailed by Chen in a speech on 18 August 2017 in which he gave instructions for the “party, government, military, police, soldiers and civilians” of XUAR to implement “comprehensive, round-the-clock and three dimensional prevention control” in order to “deny *any* opportunity to hostile forces and violent terrorists” to undermine the region’s “stability” ([88]. Emphasis added).

4 Seeing Like the CCP: ‘Social Management’, Counterterrorism and ‘Re-Education’

The methodology that has been central to the pursuit of this ‘comprehensive, round-the-clock and three dimensional prevention control’ has been the concept of ‘social

management'. Samantha Hoffman notes that 'social management' embodies an effort to optimise 'interactions vertically (within the Party), horizontally (between agencies), and holistically, between the Party and society' in order 'to improve governance capacity to shape, manage, and respond to social demands' [48]. It ultimately seeks to enhance the 'legibility' of citizens and to make them pliable subjects to be engineered and thus controlled by the state [78]. As James C. Scott reminds us, the 'utopian, immanent, and continually frustrated goal of the modern state' has been 'to reduce the chaotic, disorderly, constantly changing social reality beneath it to something more closely resembling the administrative grid of its observations' thereby rendering citizens and the spaces in which they inhabit more transparent to the gaze of the state legible and thus responsive to central manipulation and control (Ibid). In fact the 'security state' erected in Xinjiang under the tenures of XUAR CCP Party chiefs Zhang Chunxian and Chen Quanguo has enabled the Party-state to undertake 'social sorting' on a large scale. 'Social sorting', in Jenkins' conception, seeks the 'identification and ordering of individuals in order to "put them in their place" within local, national and global "institutional orders"', and to thus ascribe to them particular penalties, constraints or sanctions according to their categorization ([54]: 160). As will be detailed below, this is what has occurred to large numbers of Xinjiang's Uyghur population. The ends to which such means are deployed is not simply to increase the Party-state's ability to 'see' the Uyghur population in all its permutations but also to manufacture the consent of Uyghur population and enable it to actively mould and shape those individuals into 'productive' and pliable citizens.

The CCP's project of making of Uyghurs 'legible' has been highlighted in its recommitment to expand the security presence throughout the region, particularly through the use of enhanced surveillance capabilities, and by means of the legalization and institutionalization of ideological and political 'thought' work on its citizens. It has now been well-documented that technological innovation has been vital to this project with the use of facial recognition and iris scanners at checkpoints, train stations and gas stations, collection of biometric data for passports, and mandatory apps to cleanse smartphones of subversive material now fact of everyday life for the Uyghur population [33, 66, 67]. The data collected is then aggregated by an app used by security personnel, the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), to report "on activities or circumstances deemed suspicious" and to prompt "investigations of people the system flags as problematic" [49].

A closer examination of the legislative and discursive architecture that has been built around the surveillance apparatus reveals how precisely the CCP decides who is problematic or "untrustworthy". Legislatively, there have been a number of shifts at the national and provincial level here. First, in December 2015 the National People's Congress (NPC) passed China's first national "anti-terrorism" law, providing an expansive and ambiguous definition of terrorism that further enables the state to criminalise a wide array of actions. The law states that terrorism is:

Any advocacy or activity that, by means of violence, sabotage, or threat, aims to create social panic, undermine public safety, infringe on personal and property rights, or coerce a state organ or an international organization, in order to achieve political, ideological, or other objectives [86].

Second, the XUAR government’s March 2017 ‘de-extremification’ regulations revealed the state’s objective to categorize and punish those it defines as ‘deviant’ and ‘abnormal’. These regulations defined ‘extremification’ not only as ‘speech and actions under the influence of extremism, that imbue radical religious ideology, and reject and interfere with normal production and livelihood’ but also explicitly identified fifteen ‘primary expressions’ of ‘extremist thinking’, such as ‘wearing, or compelling others to wear, gowns with face coverings, or to bear symbols of extremification’, ‘spreading religious fanaticism through irregular beards or name selection’, and ‘failing to perform the legal formalities in marrying or divorcing by religious methods’ [31]. This list was subsequently expanded to include another sixty signs of “extremism” including such behaviors as quitting smoking and men growing long beards. This, Joanne Smith-Finley argues, amounted to a criminalization of ‘all religious behaviours, not just violent ones’, leading ‘to highly intrusive forms of religious policing’ that violate and humiliate Uyghurs [80]. ‘Extremism’, in the CCP’s definition, is thus conflated with everyday markers and practices of the Uyghur profession of Islam.

Third, China’s White Paper of 16 August 2019 on ‘Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang’ [51], neatly demonstrates the way in which surveillance is not simply about control but also the production of particular socio-political outcomes. In this instance, surveillance has enabled the CCP to define and regulate Uyghur values, beliefs, and loyalties in such a way as to ensure individuals become ‘useful’ subjects for maintaining the regime’s political security [57]. While defining ‘terrorism and extremism’ as ‘common enemies of human society’ and Xinjiang as the ‘main battlefield of China’s fight against terrorism and de-extremization’, the document asserted that the state must not only deal with ‘terrorist crimes in accordance with the law’ but also ‘educate and rescue personnel infected with religious extremism and minor crimes’ in order to treat ‘both symptoms and the root causes’ of religious extremism. The document asserts that it is through ‘education and training’ that Xinjiang will ‘achieve social stability and enduring peace’ by promoting development and increasing people’s overall income [51].

However it is a 52 gigabyte internal police dataset from the Urumqi Public Security Bureau (PSB) in the capital of the region, obtained by *The Intercept* [41] and analysed in detail by Darren Byler [3], that perhaps best demonstrates the intersection of surveillance technology and the ideological underpinnings of the current repression in Xinjiang. Beginning in 2013 the Urumqi PSB began experimenting with mobile scanning devices that ‘integrated 3G mobile technology through smart phone terminals and VPN-enabled database synchronization in order to allow rapid individual identity authentication’ ([3], 11). By 2017 this had been upgraded to allow police in the capital to scan and read ID cards, ‘instantly linking ID numbers, issuers, and photos’ of the individual being checked to the IJOP. These ‘social incident reports’—some 250 million rows of data in the files obtained by *The Intercept*—list the date and time of the encounter, the precinct, name, ID number, gender, ethnicity and phone number of the suspect. They describe the reason why the individual was flagged and if they warrant further investigation. They also list the geolocation of the encounter’ (Ibid, 12). The Urumqi PSB used this system to primarily monitor the capital’s

Uyghur and Kazakh population, subjecting them to regular checks, ‘targeted observation’, household searches, monitoring of familial and community relationships and mosque attendance (Ibid, 12–13).

Yet such ‘technology systems cannot simply be plugged in and work their magic on their own’ but ‘are only as good as the data they are trained on’ (Ibid, 19–20). Here, the data from the Urumqi PSB files demonstrates that the authorities have trained the technology to identify and aggregate actionable intelligence based on ideologically-defined criteria. Significantly, the Urumqi PSB’s hand-held mobile scanning devices are also armed with a ‘digital forensics’ tool called the ‘Anti-Terrorism Sword’ that can scan ‘smartphones and other electronic devices in less than two minutes, attempting to match materials to a base dataset of as many as 53,000 flagged audio, video, picture and text files that had been deemed related to religious extremism or terrorism’ [26]. The ‘Anti-Terrorism Sword’ also enables the police to access ‘private social media, email and instant messaging applications to assess the phone owner’s digital history and social network’ (Ibid). Through such means, as recounted to Darren Byler by an ethnic Kazakh police officer, the PSB was able to ascertain whether or not a person ‘had worn an Islamic veil, had installed WhatsApp or had traveled to Kazakhstan’ (Ibid). All of these data points—from an individual’s record of mosque attendance through to social media use or travel history—are used to flag an individual for further investigation or detention [43].

Thus the monitoring of everyday life in Uyghur neighbourhoods is geared to identify and respond to what the CCP has defined as key markers of ideological deviancy. From government officials describing Uyghur “extremism and terrorism” as a “tumour” to the equation of religious observance to an “illness”, the CCP’s discourse frames central elements of Uyghur identity as pathologies to be “cured” [35]. That such pathologizing of Uyghur identity guides official policy was made plain by a CCP Youth League official’s justification of “re-education” in October 2017. “Being infected by religious extremism and violent terrorist ideology”, the official asserted, “is like being infected by a disease that has not been treated in time, or like taking toxic drugs” and even after completing the “re-education process” individuals “must remain vigilant, empower themselves with the correct knowledge, strengthen their ideological studies ... to bolster their immune system against the influence of religious extremism and violent terrorism, and safeguard themselves from being infected once again” [71]. This frames the Uyghur population as a “virtual biological threat to the body of society” [74]. The ultimate “cure” for this biopolitical threat posed by Uyghur identity, as stated in an internal CCP document of March 2018, is to “break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins” [44]. As the dataset from the Urumqi PSB demonstrates, however, it is the surveillance apparatus erected in the region that enables the ‘social sorting’ that is central to the operation of the ‘re-education’ system in Xinjiang.

5 Conclusion

The CCP, as demonstrated above, has actively sought to manage and reshape the behaviours of the Uyghur population through a security and surveillance apparatus that makes them “transparent” to the gaze of the state and hence eminently controllable. This, as two theorists at the Xinjiang Police University argued in 2016, amounted to the emergence of a “Xinjiang model” of counterterrorism that would combine what they defined as the “war model” of counter-insurgency adopted by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan with China’s own “public security model” and “governance model” [83]. The “public security model” was built on “the construction of the anti-terrorism intelligence system”—embodied in “grid management” and technological surveillance initiatives noted above—which would provide security forces with “the ability to obtain information on signs, tendencies ... related to violence and terrorism” and thereby enhance “social prevention and control capabilities” [83]. The “governance model”, in turn, focuses on the long-term “resolution of ethnic and religious ideological issues” that give rise to “extremism” and “terrorism”. Here, Wang and Shan asserted that as religious “extremism” is an “ideological” problem it must be solved “by ideological methods” ([83]: 25). This entailed sustained “education” of the population in order to “reject the brainwashing of distorted religious views” and thereby increase their “immunity to extreme terrorism” (Ibid).

However we must recognize, as Wang and Shan’s exposition of a “Xinjiang model” of counterterrorism indicates, that the CCP’s implementation of a surveillance-enabled form of what it terms counterterrorism has not taken place in a vacuum. Rather, it is part of a globalization of “countering violent extremism” (CVE) strategies and discourses that aim to both reduce “extremism” with non-military instruments and sanctions available (or created) under domestic law and/or to prevent such “extremism” from occurring in the first place through interventions at the individual and societal level to ameliorate “root causes” of such behaviors. Simultaneously, the case of Xinjiang also reveals the unique aspects of the CCP’s practice of this globalized mania for preventative forms of counterterrorism. For the Xinjiang Police University theorists Wang and Shan the central objective of the “Xinjiang model” is to undermine what the CCP sees as a root cause of terrorism in Xinjiang: religion. “Extreme religion”, Wang and Shan assert, “attempts to change the true face of national culture and block exchanges and fusion among all ethnic groups” and as such the Party’s “cultural guidance” must assist “people of all ethnic groups” to “move closer to secularization and modernization”. The central implication is that “there must be an acceleration of ‘the deep fusion’ of Chinese culture in Xinjiang” in order to eliminate terrorism [25]. As we have seen, the CCP’s ability to break the connection between markers of Uyghur religious and cultural identity and what it perceives as “extremism” has been fundamentally enabled by both the implementation of new forms of surveillance, and reinvigoration of older forms (e.g. Maoist “mass line”), that permit “social sorting” on a mass scale. Here, the “Xinjiang model” of counterterrorism emerges as nothing less than a

new instrument with which to secure China's colonial project in Xinjiang to control, exploit and "remake" the region and its Turkic Muslim peoples.

The evolution of the "Xinjiang model" of counterterrorism has broad implications not only for the trajectory of the CCP's governance of the PRC but also for global dynamics of surveillance technologies. With respect to the governance of Xinjiang and the PRC, the system erected in Xinjiang fixes Uyghurs (and other Turkic Muslim minorities) in place, makes them "transparent" to the gaze of the state and hence eminently controllable. The technologies that have permitted the Party-state to monitor and control the population in Xinjiang potentially sets China on the path to becoming a 'responsive tyranny', in which digital technologies empower the state to act pre-emptively and to identify and quash opposition in advance, on the basis of clues gleaned from its many channels of mass information collection ([18], 64).

This technologically-enabled system of surveillance and control also intersects with global dynamics in a number of key ways. First, the utilisation of specific technological innovations such as DNA sequencing, metadata analysis, facial recognition technology and machine learning are becoming increasingly deployed by states throughout the globe across the both the global North and global South in the name of public safety and, especially, counterterrorism [10, 38, 59]. This trend makes it both easier for the Chinese state to construct a justificatory narrative around its system of control and for the state's various security apparatuses and bureaucracies to engage with and learn from international partners. Second, the Chinese state's engagement with, and prioritisation of, surveillance technologies has resulted in the increased direct involvement of a number of Chinese and global tech companies in provision of both technology and components to the "security state" in Xinjiang [29, 64]. Finally, President Xi Jinping's multi-billion dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is intended to invest only in physical infrastructures—but also in the infrastructure and technology necessary to create a "digital Silk Road." Much of this investment is coming from China's major tech companies, including Alibaba, Huawei, and ZTE [56]. In addition, the manner in which China's tech companies seem to be investing so heavily in emerging surveillance technology suggests that its gaze is broad: It wants to address Beijing's surveillance imperatives at home but also secure customers abroad [36]. While such companies are undoubtedly more focused on profit it is also likely that the "presence of Chinese engineers, managers, and diplomats will reinforce a tendency among developing countries, especially those with authoritarian governments" to adopt China's approach of ensuring that technology serves the interests of a homogeneous state [79].

While the system of pervasive surveillance—both of the 'mass line' and technologically-enabled varieties—combined with the practices of "re-education" in XUAR arguably represents an extreme example of the deeply dystopic potentialities of such "high modernist" ideologies and technologies of social control, the spread and potential normalisation of such a 'surveillance-industrial' complex through appeals to 'counter-terrorism' imperatives constitutes an emerging global challenge to norms of basic human rights that must be guarded against.

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